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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000055

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: RUMOR MILL CHURNING FEEDING A RUSSIAN
DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

REF: TBILISI 24

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary/Comment: Post is closely following what has the markings of a possible Russian disinformation campaign to create distrust and speculation with the United States and President Saakashvili in the Georgian public. Rumors of impending U.S. or other outside action to remove Saakashvili from his post and force the calling of new elections are taking on a life of their own. We have no evidence to suggest that any opposition figure is knowingly involved in this possible disinformation campaign nor any evidence of any general pro-Russian public sentiment. Instead it appears that some elements in Russia might be quietly feeding the Georgian rumor mill to help the extra-parliamentary opposition succeed in forcing an early change in government. Wild rumors are a standard part of the Georgian political landscape, but it is unclear whether the rumors were initially generated internally or externally. In any event, an apparent disinformation campaign is heating up. Both the opposition and Russia appear to believe that they can erode Saakashvili's support by intimating that the U.S. wants him replaced, hoping this will pave the way for new elections, granting both the Russians and the Georgian opposition their wish of a Georgia without Saakashvili. End Summary/Comment

A Mysterious but Familiar Letter

12. (C) Post has a copy of a purported Embassy memo dated October 27, 2008 written by a non-existent "Senior Counsellor Jonathan Earl" to Ambassador Tefft outlining an increasingly problematic President Saakashvili. (Embassy Note: Letter will be forwarded on unclassified system to the Georgia Desk. End Note.) The memo uses Embassy letter head and is purportedly from the consular section in Tbilisi. The letter which is clearly written by a non-native English speaker with phrases such as "(t)o our opinion, it is thereupon especially noteworthy that our source in Ministry of State Security of Georgia reports security officials to express more and more often discontent with President Saakashvili, criticizing most of his recent decisions in the lobbies." The lack of, or misplaced use of articles and word order tend to indicate a native Russian speaker. Embassy officers who have worked in Central Asia recalled similar letters being circulated in Bishkek and Tashkent expressing dissatisfaction with the ruling regime. The letter allegedly shows Embassy discontent with Saakashvili's handling of the economy; irrational personal behavior; working with the EU "behind our back;" and corruption. The letter advises the Ambassador to work with opposition leaders whom we regard as acceptable substitutes to replace Saakashvili.

Tabloids Picking Up the "News"

13. (C) In December, the Tabloid Kronika reported that the "future of Georgian politics is now being decided in John Tefft's residence". The article goes on to allege that the Ambassador has been having meetings about changing the governmental structure of Georgia to a model based on the

German Parliamentary system. The article surmises that the U.S. supports 50-50 parity in the Parliament to limit Saakashvili's power. Kronika reports that Minister of Interior Vano Merabishvili and Prosecutor General Zurab Adeishvili (Embassy Note: Adeishvili is currently the Minister of Justice. End Note.) have been frequent guests to the Ambassador's residence recently. (Embassy Note. Neither has been to the residence in recent months. End note.) QKronika reported that Senator Kerry discussed the "U.S. suggested model" with Saakashvili during his December visit. Kronika also speculates that Saakashvili will move to implement this U.S. model to preempt being overthrown in April.

Some Opposition Picking Up the Ball and Running

¶4. (C) Dima Shashkin (strictly protect), Director of the local International Republican Institute (IRI) office, told us that New Rights, the Republicans, and Nino Burjanadze were all seeking to capitalize on these stories, although they were not the sources of the rumors. Burjanadze, as well as her supporters, apparently is hinting that she is the U.S. choice for President while New Rights and Republicans are touting Irakli Alasania as the preferred U.S. candidate. Zurab Tkemaladze (Leader of Industrialists) confirmed the same to Poloff. Giorgi Targamadze (Leader of Christian Democrats) has also heard the rumors, telling Poloff that new elections would only benefit the Russians. MP Jondi Bahgaturi (Independent) likewise said that the rumors serve only the purposes of the non-Parliamentary opposition and one does not need to look any further than at who is peddling them. It remains to be seen what effect the signing of the

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U.S.-Georgia charter and the upcoming change in U.S. administrations will have on these rumors, although both should serve to tamp down some speculation about U.S. intentions at least temporarily.

¶5. (C) The non-Parliamentary opposition has made clear its desire for Saakashvili's resignation. With little chance of that happening and early parliamentary elections looking increasingly unlikely, the scenarios to force the removal of Saakashvili from office are becoming increasingly outlandish. However, politicians across the spectrum from Kakha Kukava (Conservatives) to the Christian Democrats have told us that the public is taking them seriously. The phony letter and dubious news reports of meetings seemingly are efforts to backfill some factual credibility into the rumors. All the commentators have told us a similar reasoning behind the rumors. The U.S. supported Shevarnadze and replaced him with Saakashvili when Shevarnadze became unacceptable. Now the U.S. views Saakashvili as unacceptable and will replace him with Alasania or Burjanadze. They also said that being perceived as having U.S. support is key to political success in Georgia and if Saakashvili is deemed to have lost U.S. "support", it could negatively affect him. However, none expressed the view that Saakashvili was in any political danger.

¶6. (C) Tkemaladze told Poloff that political observers in Tbilisi are watching anxiously for signs of U.S. intentions, something that is heightened by the impending change in U.S. administrations. Tkemaladze says speculation is rife about David Gamkrelidze and David Usupashvili's role in some sort of grand plan. Tkemaladze noted that both have had numerous meetings with U.S. officials and visitors. (Embassy Note: The two were involved in many opposition roundtables as a matter of course during the numerous high level post-war visits. End Note.) Tkemaladze also noted both travel frequently to the U.S. Tkemaladze alleged that at some point, Gamkrelidze and Usupashvili were told by a senior U.S. official to unite their parties and step back to pave the way for Alasania to lead this newly formed opposition party. Tkemaladze says it makes some sense because it is virtually unheard of in Georgian politics for anybody to give up the

top spot. While our interlocutors all denied having put any stock in the rumors and no one took credit for starting them, Giorgi Targamadze thought enough of them to approach Dima Shashkin in what Shashkin described as a panic and every one who commented explained to Poloff in great detail why they theoretically could be true. Despite the dubious merits, the rumors have created a stir even among sophisticated actors and will undoubtedly continue to make the rounds in Tbilisi.

TEFFT